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Trading for Opportunities

The does-he or doesn't-he speculation is over: U.S. Rep. Bill Jefferson said Monday that he supports the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

In truth, it would have been odd if Mr. Jefferson had done anything else. He has been a staunch supporter of free trade and is among the few Democrats who is willing to break with his party to help pass trade measures. For instance, he helped write and pass the bill to give President Bush fast-track authority to negotiate trade treaties.

Still, the sugar industry is doing its best to kill CAFTA, which would eliminate most U.S. trade barriers with five Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. With sugar against it, few other Louisiana politicians have been willing to back the deal. In fact, Mr. Jefferson is the lone state Democrat and only the second member of the state's congressional delegation to support the trade pact. The other is Republican Rep. Jim McCreery, whose North Louisiana district is far outside sugar country.

After two years of negotiations between the United States and its would-be trading partners, CAFTA is expected to come up for a vote in Congress this year. It fares a good chance in the Senate but is likely to have tough going in the House.

Mr. Jefferson, who is on the Ways and Means Committee and its subcommittee on trade, said his decision came down to a question of economic opportunity. One study indicates that CAFTA would spark an additional \$82 million in exports from Louisiana to Central America. New Orleans port officials, who are strong proponents of the agreement, say its passage would dramatically increase tonnage through the port.

While sugar producers worry about the negative impact of broadening trade with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, other Louisiana industries can expect to benefit. Soybeans, rice, cotton, petrochemicals and any number of other state products should find ready markets in Central America. Increases in exports and the increase in goods handled by Louisiana ports are predicted to create jobs as well.

"In this economy, we can not afford to say no to the creation of jobs in this state," Mr. Jefferson said Monday. And the agreement is too important, he said, to get hung up on a single issue like sugar. He's right about that.

It's too bad that other Louisiana lawmakers don't see things that way.